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ABSTRACT

Since 1969 a bright yellow van with "Texas Migrant Council" painted on the side has symbolized hope for progress for thousands of Texas migrants. The van itself is a mobile school that follows migrant families out of their home base state of Texas to northern labor camps each summer. It brings with it books, teachers, health care, hot food and programs for the children and adults. The van also symbolizes a wide variety of services waiting back home. Besides the mobile Head Start program for children up to 5 years of age, the Council offers a Home Start program to train parents in remote areas in teaching their young children the same skills taught in a Head Start Program. The Teen Start program offers recreation, counseling, tutoring and job placement at eight centers. The Manpower Program helps migrants learn skills for better paying occupations, pays them wages for learning, and finds them jobs. Alcoholism projects, drug avoidance campaigns, child abuse prevention, educational television series, and coordination with outside agencies are among the other services offered. For the quarter million migrant families living in the Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley, the Council brings options few have ever had before of self help, social advancement, and the opportunity to choose. (Author/DS)

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an Opportunity to Choose

The Texas Migrant Council

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The Texas Migrant Council in Action

Have you and your family dined on some nice asparagus lately? Beets? Tomatoes? Lettuce or cucumbers? Apples?

If so, the chances are very good those food products were harvested from the earth by one or more of the thousands of men, women, and children who migrate from Texas each spring to the "green belt" of the north, midwest and western states such as Oregon, Idaho, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana.

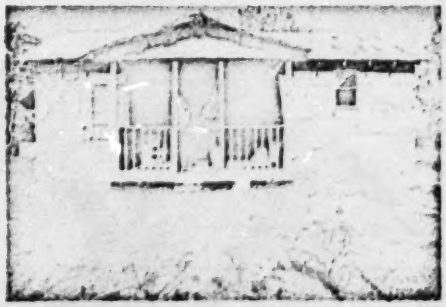
These are the people of the infamous "Migrant Stream". They are strong but poor, have always been poor. Most of them are Mexican-American, of whom many speak no English. They travel in families, in caravans, as their mothers and fathers did before them, even as their grandparents did, boarding up their little homes in Cotulla, Mission, Carrizo Springs, fanning out to the labor camps in Marion, Hoopesville, Watertown—and they work.

The day begins at 5 a.m. It can last as long as 12 hours, depending on the weather and condition of the crops. While the older migrants sweat in the sun, the younger stay behind in shacks, trailers, and pick-up trucks. Three-year-olds are cared for by eight-year-olds. They swat at flies. They poke their spoons into bowls of mush grown hard and cold since morning. They languish.

In a city somewhere, these children would likely be in school or in day-care centers. They would be given nutritious hot meals, medical attention, a chance to begin or continue their educations, to advance beyond the fifth-grade level of their parents—a chance to break out of the relentless "Migrant Stream". But here in the camps, 1500 miles from home, they are subject to the same old cycle of hunger, disease, and neglect—unless there is parked nearby a bright yellow van with "Texas Migrant Council" painted neatly on the side.

Since 1969, that yellow van has become a symbol of hope and progress for thousands of migrant families. It represents not only a mobile day-care/head-start program for the children, a "school-on-wheels" that follows the families to the camps, bringing with it books and teachers, health care and hot food, as well as programs for adults. It also means a comprehensive, ever-treasure of services back home in the dusty streets of southwest Texas: community health and headstart centers, teen-age dances and sports events, college opportunities, drug avoidance campaigns, adult education, cultural awareness, manpower training and employment programs.

In short, for the quarter-million migrant families in the Lower Rio Grande and the "Winter Garden" counties near the Mexico border— families whose average yearly income is $3800—the Texas Migrant Council has brought the beginning of the end to three generations of grinding poverty and not-so-benign neglect. It has opened a new wellspring of dignity and pride, of self-help and social advancement. It has brought an opportunity to choose.



Beginning with Education

There is a town in Starr County, Texas, called La Grulla, which is Spanish for "migratory bird". Each spring and summer, nine out of every ten families who live there, all Mexican-American, nail shut the doors to their flimsy homes and migrate north to pick their meager earnings from the soil.

There is a woman in La Grulla named Elia Flores. Until a few years ago, she was "just another picker" floating along in the migrant stream, growing from child to adult with not a shred of hope that she might one day "amount to something" else than a seasonal laborer. Today, perhaps still to her surprise, she has indeed amounted to something else—a well-paid, highly respected teacher in the Mobile Bilingual Head Start program administered by the Texas Migrant Council (TMC). She continues to drive north each summer with her family and friends—recently it was the asparagus fields in Prescott, Washington—but instead of the gloom of constant toil she carries in her yellow van a freight of education, health, and a brighter future for the migrants in her charge.

There is a six year old boy in La Grulla named David Zarate. He will start public school this year, and there is a chance that he will make it through all 12 years and then even to college—because, since 1972, he has been a student in the Mobile Bilingual Head Start program operated by people like Elia Flores.

This is not a "Cinderella" story. It is a typical example of the TMC approach to the education of the migrant—not just preschoolers but teenagers and adults as well.

TMC commenced its Head Start Program in 1969 with four mobil centers, one in Brownsville, Weslaco, Eagle Pass, Laredo, and one in McAlien. They were largely experimental, the birth of a dream whose time had come. Today there are 18 centers spread throughout the ten-county region in which the Council has focused its efforts—an area comprising some 116,000 migrant poor whose average educational level, among heads of households, is 4.5.

It occurred early on to directors and planners in TMC that their Head Start program, though funded largely by the same federal money that goes to other Head Start facilities in the U.S., would have to be different. If, for example, it was to provide the necessary continuity of instruction, it would have to be mobile, to follow the families north each summer (a new concept in Head Start education.) It would have to be bilingual. It would have to offer a cur-

riculum based on the life-realities of the migrant child, with concepts and language he could readily understand, and it would have to embody a strong component of cultural awareness and ethnic pride. A nutritional component would also be necessary, as well as components in health, psychological counseling and allied servies, aid to handicapped children, and parental involvement. Finally, the program had best be staffed by migrants themselves, or ex-migrants, who could thus develop new careers for themselves while serving their brothers and sisters.

In a typical season, when the families arrive at their northern labor camps, the children are assigned to Head Start facilities established in advance by TMC staffers under the direction of Onesimo Castillo. Many of these facilities are "loaned" to the Council by local churches and other institutions in places like Peru, Indiana. The program curriculum, developed especially for TMC by the Southwest Educational Development Lab, consists of three phases, one each for three-, four-, and five-year-olds. Each phase is comprised of 30-odd "learning units" aimed at developing every aspect of the child's personality: cognitive and perceptual skills, motor skills, vision, hearing, mathematics, language skills, ideas,and other subjects, In addition to the formal curriculum, the child is given supervised playtime, health care, and, perhaps most important, two hot meals and two snacks a day.

The program has worked. A recent evaluation showed that, in handwriting and spelling for example, the migrant preschoolers improved their respective grade-ranks by one month for every 20 days in the program. In reading, those children exposed to the curriculum for 200 days registered test scores higher than the national mean. Similar gains were recorded for math and other subjects.

Back home in Texas, the Head Start centers have inevitably taken on a wide variety of allied community functions, from health care to parents meetings and teen activities (which suits the Council just fine). One of the most important of these is the Career Development Committee, and organization of TMC staffers whose function is to advance their own educations and professional expertise. They may, if they wish, enroll in a special program at Texas A & I, in Kingsville, leading to a certificate as a Childhood Development Associate. This opens the door not only to a career as a bonafide paraprofessional but to further college work.

Encouraged by the success of these and other of its educational programs, TMC is constantly seeking ways to reach still more of the migrant population It has launched campaigns in child abuse prevention, for example, as well as drug and alcohol avoidance, It has gone "on the air" with a regionally broadcast television series called "Problemas Familiares", through which the audience is treated to lively instruction in subjects ranging from "Sound Prenatal Practices" to "The Sound Mother" and "The Sound Father." Finally, on a radio program called "Proyecto Informacion", in Ohio, the Council has established a source of community news and commentary, public service announcements, and Mexican music and culture.

Providing Health Services

In a sense, almost every program sponsored by TMC is a "health program", because TMC is committed to the upgrading of the whole migrant person, whether child or adult—and a person who is ill, either physically or mentally, is not yet a whole person. TMC has been obliged to assume this responsibility because, in health as in education, employment, and other spheres of life, the Texas migrant has been neglected by other agencies and institutions. (The approximate ratio of doctors to population in the 10 county migrant area is .6 per 1000; of dentists, .05 per 1000 persons.)

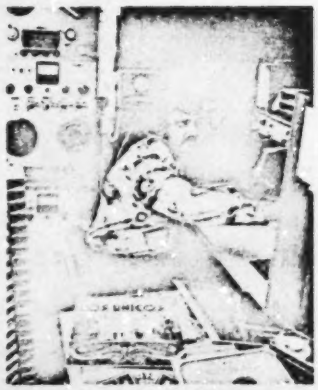
Consequently, one of the first objectives in the training of virtually any new member of the Council staff is health and nutritional education, including first aid. These are also strong components in the Head Start, Home Start, and Teen Start programs. In the Manpower project, to be discussed later, the migrant enrollee is given both medical and psychological support services. Because of this repeated emphasis on health, including a system of medical referrals and public awareness campaigns, any Texas migrant who needs assistance knows he can get it, one way or another, from TMC.

The most comprehensive of the Council's health programs is that connected with the Head Start Centers. In addition to a trained staff, each center has a Health Advisory Group, comprised of teachers, nurses, health-providers, and parents, as well as a Core Group consisting primarily of parent "health volunteers." Every child enrolled in a Center receives a thorough medical screening: vision and hearing, blood tests, TB tests and urinalysis — as well as immunizations and dental examinations. A profile of this analysis, often compiled by parent volunteers who assist in the testing, becomes a permanent part of the migrant student's record file, which follows him wherever he goes. Should the child require treatment unavailable at the Center, he is referred to another agency, clinic, or private physician, whether at home or up north in the labor camps. (Since the costs of such treatment must often be defrayed through Medicaid, the child's parents are screened by the Center for Medicaid eligibility at the time the child is enrolled.)

A more recent expression of the Council's interest in migrant health is the Rural Migrant Health Aide Development Project. "Its purpose," says Oscar Villareal, executive director of TMC, "is to research the best ways to train health aides who can truly serve and relate to the rural migrant community." Once this "training package" has been developed and the aides themselves trained, two objects will have been accomplished: (1) systematic health care for rural migrants otherwise hard to reach, and (2) para-professional health careers for those migrants who opt to become aides.

Still another TMC program aimed at the health of the migrant community is the Interstate Mobile Migrant Alcoholism Project. The unfortunate necessity for such a program stems, of course, from the same combination of negative forces which produces so many other problems for migrants: disruptive seasonal occupation, extremely low income and education, frequent sense of failure and "futurelessness"—the enormous difficulties of living in the "migrant stream." The program itself, under the auspices of a project director, is implemented by a caseworker who attempts where possible to involve the client's entire family in the treatment process. Because the program must be mobile, to follow the alcoholic migrant "upstream", it is often attached to a mobile Head Start Center.

Coordinating with Others



It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the Texas Migrant Council — though immensely proud of the huge scope and efficiency of its own "in-house" staff and network of services — could not function without the support and cooperation of outside agencies, institutions, and individuals so many and varied that they literally span the North American continent. Indeed, a major part of the Council's administrative work is simply the coordination of these thousands of "helping hands."

Much of TMC's funding, for example, comes from the federal government. The Mobile Head Start Program is particularly indebted to the Indian and Migrant Program Division of the Office of Child Development, itself a wing of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (which provides still further support, indirectly, through programs like Medicaid and Food Stamps). The U.S. Department of Labor has reinforced the Council's Manpower, while VISTA volunteers paid by the government have helped to implement the Teen Start Program launched by TMC.

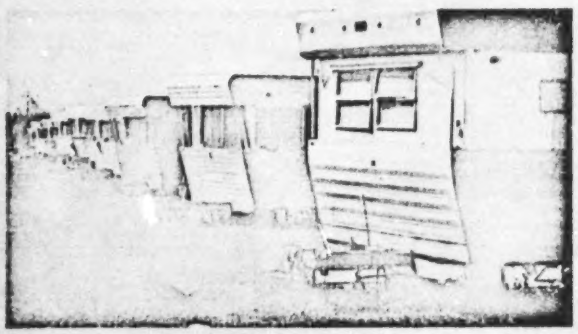
The state government of Texas has done its part as well. More than once has the Council leaned on the Governor's Office of Migrant Affairs. Nurses and officials of the State Department of Health continue to provide invaluable assistance, as does the Department of Public Welfare (DPW). Here, in fact, is part of a letter to the Council from DPW's director of Family and Children Services in regard to the Council's Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention program: "The TMC helps DPW by providing the ethnic and cultural knowledge to deal with the special problems of child abuse and neglect prevention among migrant families. DPW helps them by providing the legal framework for protecting the children. You need both to make the difference." The Texas Education Agency has joined the Council in a pilot project to implement a program for teaching migrant four-year-olds. And Texas A&I University, in Kingsville, has worked with the Council to formulate a Childhood Development Associate program through which TMC staffers may earn college credits while advancing their own professional careers.

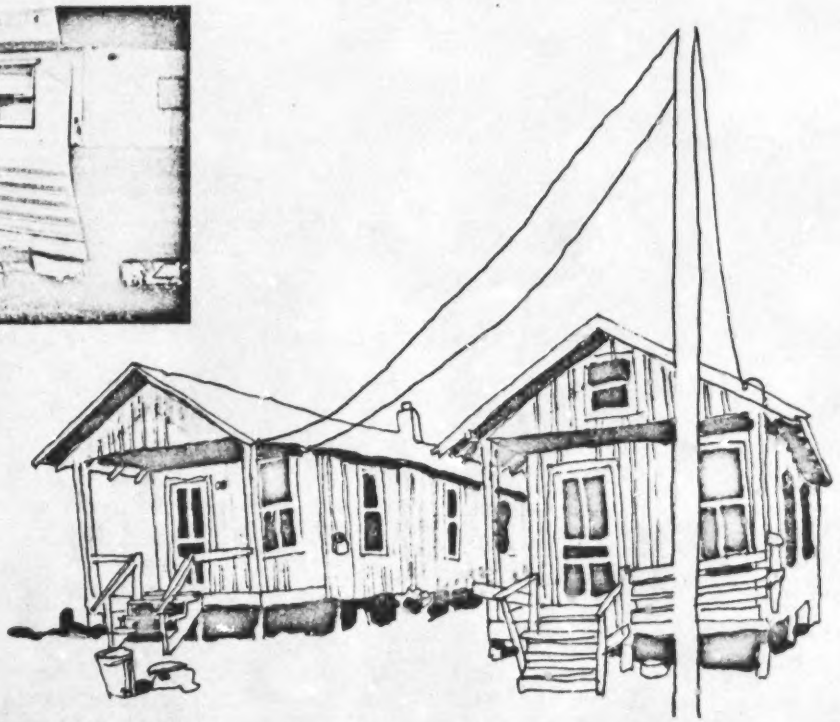
At the local level in Texas, municipal governments, churches, clinics and school districts — not to mention hundreds of individual volunteers — all have strengthened the Council's efforts on behalf of the migrant population. Churches and schools have furnished space for daycare centers, as well as referrals of migrant children themselves, while local businessmen have contributed equipment to sports clubs and other components.

It is difficult enough for the Council to coordinate such a vast array of contributions on its own "home turf" in Texas. It is still more difficult to negotiate the same kinds of inputs— along with certain obstacles — 1500 miles north in the states and communities surrounding the

migrant labor camps. Child-care licenses have to be obtained from states and local governments. Space and facilities have to be "borrowed" from churches, schools, and other institutions. Clinics must be found for migrants needing treatment or medicine (the Council has a list of more than 80 clinics and Planned Parenthood centers in four northern states alone.) Sources of food and other supplies must be established in advance of the migrants' arrival. The labor camps themselves must be inspected, and, where possible, upgraded.

Sometimes this work approaches the point of being humanly impossible. Yet it has to be done, and it is done, often with the help of friends the Council has made through the years it has worked in the "migrant stream." Two of these friends are Associated Migrant Opportunity Service (AMOS) in Indiana and La Raza Unida, an Ohio social action agency. Others include the Green Giant Corporation, which recently installed a battery of new mobile homes in one of its camps, and Morgan Packing Company, which lent the Council financial support. Some of the strongest of the Council's friends are local churches who donate space and volunteer labor. They have developed a pervasive respect for TMC, and the feeling, as this quote from a letter suggests, is mutual: "Dear Mr. Villareal — It was really a pleasant surprise to walk into our Fellowship Hall and other rooms at the church and find them freshly painted and looking very pretty. The water fountain is such a nice addition to our church too . . . It has been a joy to share and work with you this past summer and we look forward to having you back. Hazel D. Wilson, Church Clerk, Temple Congregational Church, Marion, Indiana."





Parental Involvement

The migrant farmworker experience is a family experience. There is perhaps no other social or occupational group in the United States for whom the health and integrity of the family unit are more important. Not only does the migrant family live together — often in homes of two or three rooms for families of seven or eight — but it works together to achieve what little income the family is to have. This means the family travels together — thousands of miles per year. It means constant daily exposure to each other, sharing space, utensils, bedding, clothes, food, ideas and conversation. If something good happens, like a song or a child's drawing, it happens to everyone. If something bad happens, like malnutrition, body lice, or child abuse, it happens to everyone.

It is this striking closeness and interdependence of the migrant family which led the TMC — at the outset of its existence — to emphasize "parental involvement" as a major component in all of its programs, from Mobile Bilingual Head Start to Community Health Services. "The parents," says Oscar Villareal, "are the primary educators of their children." From this simple dictum, drilled into the minds of every member of the TMC staff, has flowed a steady stream of concepts and innovations designed to support the parents of migrant children in their critical role.

Each Head Start Center, for example, is mandated to establish a Parents Advisory Committee (PAC). This group serves a twofold purpose: (1) it enables the parents of Head Start children to learn, through meetings and activities with teachers and other staff-members, some of the skills necessary to reinforce the work of the Head Start program; (2) it enables staff members to learn from parents how best to approach the varied needs and personalities of the children. The parents in these groups are also utilized to help raise funds, enlist volunteers, and stimulate community involvement. So high is the energy in some of the parents' committees that they have sponsored floats in local parades and conducted "Awards Banquets" to recognize the contributions of their many volunteers. In addition, the chairperson of each PAC is automatically a member of the Parent Policy Council, which advises the TMC Board of Directors on general Head Start Policy.

Still another facet of parental involvement in the Head Start Program is the Health Advisory Committee attached to each center. Here, again, the parents are taught those basics of health, hygiene, and nutrition which they will need to reinforce at home what their children learn at school. Some of these parents serve further in Core Groups whose function is to assist the TMC health staff in keeping records, administering tests for hearing and vision, coordinating client appointments, and a myriad of other responsibilities. As with most TMC programs, the experience thus gained by a parent may well become the springboard to a new career as a health paraprofessional.

Homestart

Many thousands of migrant families cannot be reached by the regular Head Start program because they live in rural areas remote from the network of major TMC facilities. Yet these families need help too. So — in keeping with its philosophy of trying to serve as many families as resources and ingenuity will allow — the Council has evolved still another device for achieving what to some would seem impossible. It is called Home Start, and it carries the notion of "parents as primary educator" to a new degree of refinement.

The first step in the development of the Home Start program was to carefully select a number of Head Start professionals and aides to receive additional training as Home Start Visitors -- generally under the supervision of each local Head Start director.

This was no small matter, for it meant learning how to teach parents not simply to back up the teachers of their children, but to be the teachers of their children — at least until their children are old enough to enter public school. Such a task, for the Home Start Visitor in training, implied the polishing of numerous subtle skills: how to convince poorly educated parents that they are capable of being "teachers in the home;" how to develop parent skills in promoting the basic psychomotor, language; and conceptual facilities of their preschool children; how to show parents to use their own resources (including simple objects like thimbles and buckets and bottlecaps) as "visual aids" and other materials to buttress their works as "teachers."

Once these and a score of other techniques had been digested, the Home Start Visitors set off on their rounds. Their complicated work was guided by a three-fold message to the parents: envolverse (to get involved in the children's lives), endredar (to get entangled), comprometer (to be committed to onself, to an idea, to a responsibility). The parents were made to realize that in their roles as teachers they would learn too. Each successful "lesson" for their children would be a success for themselves. The parents were given specific training in language and math, in cultural awareness and ethnic pride, in nutrition, in methods for working with handicapped children — even in toymaking, sewing, and woodworking!

To supplement and reinforce this "curriculum," Home Start Visitors also encourage the parents to form their own rural Parent Advisory Committees, to hold monthly meetings in which they share experiences and establish facilities for mutual use, like "toy-lending libraries," equipment centers, and workshops on homemaking skills. These meetings serve another purpose as well: they help to strengthen the parents' self-image by developing a knowledge of social and political group dynamics, parliamentary procedures, self-assertiveness and public speaking. That's another plus for the children, because, in the long run, their self-image will derive its strength from their parents' self-image.

Teenstart

The crucial link between a promising child and a healthy, productive adult — especially in social groups afflicted by institutionalized poverty — is a healthy adolescent whose dreams are not crushed by educational deprivation, crime, or drugs. Such an adolescent or rather thousands of them are the unabashed goal of TMC's comprehensive Teen Start program — a natural adjunct to its other programs, with many of the same features of "supervised self-reliance," community support, and parental involvement.

The program started with two local centers planted deliberately in poor migrant communities with no prior facilities for teenagers — many of whom, increasingly, were dropping out of school, turning to drugs, substituting crime for meaningful work. Those two centers have expanded to eight, staffed mainly by Vista volunteers, and their accomplishments are legion. Bowling leagues and baseball teams (some of which pit teams of sons against teams of fathers) now abound. There are dances, teen-staffed tutorial programs for younger children, drug-abuse seminars, fund-raising bazaars, job-placement services, drop-out counseling where the parent and teenager both are involved, field-trips to colleges and universities, teen-produced newsletters, Christmas parties, and vocational counseling clinics.

These Teen Start activites, whether conducted in or out of the seasonal "migrant stream," all converge toward one simple objective: to give these kids a choice in their lives which their parents didn't have. An opportunity to choose.

Manpower

The newest and one of the brightest links in the TMC chain of services to its migrant families is the Manpower Program, funded by a grant from the Governor's Office of Migrant Affairs. The object of the program is to help the migrant worker advance his or her "life-position" by learning the skills to undertake a different, better-paying occupation with "career-potential" and other benefits not generally occuring to the farm laborer. Chief among the reasons for such a project, aside from the inherent desirability of breaking out of the cycle of migrant poverty and deprivation, is that continued advances in agricultural technology and automation are expected to eliminate up to 50% of the existing migrant labor force by 1985. Unless these workers have prepared vocationally and psychologically for different fields, their "obsolescence" will plunge them from the poverty of seasonal farm work to the brute dead-end of welfare.

The "target area" for the Manpower Program is a 12-county district comprising the highest percentage of migrant families in the nation. Once admitted to the program, open only to migrants, the Manpower trainee is exposed to a highly sophisticated, "client-centered" technique of vocational education through which the trainee's chances for success are uncommonly good. Instead of being thrown blindly into this or that trade school, the trainee is assigned to a sensitive Employability Development Team which treats him as an adult capable of making his own career choices. This develops confidence in the trainee, a stronger self-image — important components in his struggle to break out of the "culture of poverty."

Among the occupations from which he or she may choose are nursing, printing, fire-fighting, air-conditioning repair, bookkeeping, sheetmetal work — the list is quite long.. At every step along the way, the trainee is bolstered by a wide range of support services, from academic tutoring to psychological counseling, and, for the duration of the program, he is paid an hourly living wage.

Most important, the program places as much emphasis on finding jobs for the trainees as it does on training.

Goals

With seven years of sometimes painful experience under its belt — each year a leap farther forward in the daily lives and future prospects of migrant North America — the Texas Migrant Council is mobilizing for the still greater challenges, responsibilities, and triumphs which lie ahead. The work is not done, and will not be done until there is not a single hungry child, humiliated father, or illiterate teenager remaining in the migrant stream. Until that time the command is clear: improve and expand existing services, staff, and facilities while innovating new ones to reach more migrants in the totality of their struggle for a dignified and productive existence.

To prepare for the battles to accomplish this goal, the Council, like any good strategist, has launched an ambitious research and test campaign called The Interstate Human Development Program. Funded by the Children's Bureau of Research and Demonstration, HEW, the project is aimed toward a "needs-profile" of the migrant population which is so thorough that a comprehensive, integrated system of services — meeting every important need of every needy migrant family — can at last be developed and implemented.

While this and other research is being assembled, amidst the continued operations of established services, the Council is also seeking a new and dramatic extension of the proven benefits of the Manpower Project. "It is not enough," says Oscar Villareal, "to train a carpenter or a sheetmetal worker if there isn't a job near his home in which to place him." The logical next step is a regional Economic Development Plan which would create companies offering such jobs and place the ownership of those companies — from hamburger stands to cabinet shops — in the hands of the people themselves.

That, among other things, is what the Texas Migrant Council means by "an opportunity to choose."

TMC Staff

Abdon Ibarra, Jr., is director of the Child Abuse and Neglect Program and the Rural Migrant Health Program. In addition to supervising record-keeping for the TMC Headstart Program, Abdon supervises field nurse teams, and has helped to develop training and technical assistance plans for TMC children, staff and parents.

John E. Gonzales is Assistant Headstart Director. John has spent years working with children. For three consecutive years he served as counselor for Boys Club of Corpus Christi. His duties at TMC include supervision of the Vista Volunteers.

Guadalupe M. Cortes is comptroller of TMC. Guadalupe has made fiscal and office management her career for the past 17 years. She has one of the most complex jobs in TMC. Her accounting responsibilities are complicated by the fact that TMC personel and operations are frequently on the move from area to area, from state to state.

Oscar Villarreal is the executive director of TMC. Oscar has a record of dedicated service to migrants dating back to 1963 when he taught migrant children in an elementary school in Weslaco, Texas. Oscar served as educational director of the Mobil Head Start project under the Colorado Migrant Council. Villarreal has a B.S. degree in Secondary Education, and an M.S. degree in school administration.

Onesimo Castillo, a former migrant is director of the Interstate Migrant Headstart Program and TMC operations director. Onesimo is in charge of a headstart program that is unlike most others. This one stretches into 8 different states and involves numerous sattilite centers. He has received specialized training in community resource mobilization, youth development training, and early childhood development.

Hector Jimenez is director of the TMC Manpower Program. Hector has been involved in anti-poverty programs since 1966, but he considers his present position with TMC as his most challenging to date. Jimenez is responsible for training and job placement in TMC's Manpower Program, one of the organization's extensive components. Jimenez's efforts are geared to direct removal of individuals from the migrant stream.